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***** Dialog

Powering the Point of Sale.

Nation's Restaurant News , Volume: 34 , Number: 21 , Page: 16 , May 22 2000

Restaurateurs are increasingly using the POS to gather information on their customers and enhance their business.

You'll still find restaurants totaling the bill the old way -- orders scrawled and toted up by hand, cashier with wrinkled brow figuring in the sales tax, credit card crunched onto carbon sheets, validation painfully slow through a little touch-pad attached by a screw and a single wire to the telephone.

But gone are the days when the point-of-sale was viewed merely as a checkout tool. Today POS technology -- whether used by a single restaurant, a giant chain or sizes in between -- is expected to run a number of functions from inventory and data collection to payment systems and order control.

"Restaurants are way beyond basics in picking a POS system," says Kay Branson, director of marketing for Digital Dining. "No restaurant should open its doors without some kind of computerized POS. It would be like getting on the LA freeway with a blindfold on -- you don't know where you're going or who you're bumping into. POS now provides capabilities and management facts essential to running a restaurant."

"Think of POS as the transaction engine inside your business," says Bill Grant, vice president of sales for Ibertech, which manufactures the Aloha POS system. "So that makes it the logical place to tack all the other stuff on. That other stuff has become so dynamic that what we're really talking about now is not interface among various systems but complete integration. When people talk POS today, they are actually weighing the single system that locks down the desktop, payroll, food stuffs, inventory, administrative reports -- and POS."

Digital Dining, Ibertech and such other companies as Tridex -- whose customers include Starbucks, McDonald's and Hardee's -- offer rapid, easily changed, color-coded, touch-screen POS systems that simultaneously can connect the kitchen to the front-of-the-house, handle multiple reservations lines and generate customer receipts, sales reports and inventory lists.

In Germany this spring IBM unveiled its Internet-register-connected SuperPOS 700 Series that allows immediate inventory update, monitors sales on slow-moving items and -- via an in-store kiosk and with web capabilities -- offers new services and promotional opportunities that the customer can access directly. Optimal Robotics Corp. and other companies are exploring self-checkout systems with application for high-traffic bar, beverage and snack operations. Ibertech's Grant predicts that soon automobiles will contain wireless devices that can identify the owner, customize selections and offer automatic payment at a restaurant's drive-thru window.

"Some of these ideas are wonderful, and certainly the technology is there to create them," Grant says. "But restaurant people also have to be concerned about hardware companies creating a solution for a non-existent problem, or for a customer base that is not yet there."

Still, as foodservice businesses determine what they require today in a POS system, experts advise them

to look beyond traditional POS issues and understand what computer technology has to offer. Many of the POS systems currently on the market feature capabilities a particular restaurant may not require today, but which are available as no-cost options or as add-ons. Examine the systems offered by many POS vendors, and you'll discover basic computer platforms at work and Internet capabilities as well. Grant sees this as a giant step away from the "crunching databases" approach of the early 1990s, which required large IT staffs and seemed out of the reach of the average foodservice operator. Today they're accessible because of simpler tools, more uniformity and the Internet.

Digital Dining developed its systems with the intention of making them affordable for an individual restaurateur, Branson says. However, the company discovered that scalability and special reporting abilities have generated considerable interest from corporations with multiple restaurant outlets.

Ibertech's Aloha system -- which has the capacity to zip reports to corporate headquarters via the Internet -- was aimed at the multiunit restaurant company. But through multiple Aloha resellers, the system is making inroads with smaller concerns as well.

This is an indication of how the technology and adaptable design have driven down the costs of even the most sophisticated POS systems, making them affordable to both large and small companies. Moreover, the vendors maintain that the systems pay for themselves because of the way they can be utilized.

The data collected at the POS alone can be translated quickly into marketing opportunities for savvy operators. Many systems now contain the built-in capability to sign up customers for frequent dining benefits; generate mailing lists for birthdays; create special reservation services; allow the human server, based on the order entered, to offer an appetizer or dessert that fits the entr(acute[e])e or the customer profile; and provide a customized "comeback" coupon at checkout.

Branson describes it as "major marketing without the maintenance." She is not alone in believing that restaurants must opt for POS systems that contain the capabilities for customer profiling, coupon intelligence, loyalty rewards and other frequent-dining offerings.

But marketing is just the tip of the iceberg. Instant reporting, employee training and delivery services are some additional areas POS technology can help bolster productivity for operators.

All those Internet and other potentials are built into the 9000 PC, LAN manager and other hardware and software brand components of Panasonic, a major provider of POS for the quick-service market. (One of its POS divisions, in fact, is totally devoted to McDonald's POS development.) However, Al Rubin, Panasonic product manager in the Retail Systems Group, cautions about not overlooking durability as well as adaptability in developing a POS approach.

"There is a fine line between technology and the reliability and durability of hardware and some risk in choosing too far at the cutting edge," he says. Technical support is also a key issue, which is why so many POS systems, while they can be developed on a large scale for specific companies, are mainly available to restaurants through resellers, or what Panasonic specifically calls its "master supplier" program. "They're local, they've been in business for at least 10 years, and you're likely to see them on a regular basis," Rubin says. "They also have to take responsibility for all levels of the system they install, so you know who to go to in time of need -- and that's a very important element of choosing any business computer system these days!"

Rubin agrees that a good POS system can pay for itself, but he points out that it is "an important and expensive investment, so you want to make sure of what you're doing." He also believes that it is

- dangerous to focus on the front of the house aspects of a POS system "while the really important developments and savings are what it can do at the back of the house in integrating everything."

Receiving information quickly at the corporate level is paramount to success, and getting instant reporting from a POS system can make a huge difference to operators. "The CEO can look over the reports from the previous day over coffee before his 9 a.m. meeting," Grant says. "He can see what sold, what outlets are lagging, what innovations are moving ahead. For multioutlet restaurants this is an efficiency only possible through a POS married to all the other services and systems."

"Unquestionably, this is an advantage of the modern POS -- back-end reporting, offering a range of reporting capabilities out of which each company can pick what they really want to know," Branson says. "For the multistore model, this use of the Internet allows centralized sharing with corporate headquarters in a quick and convenient way we didn't have before."

POS systems even can be employed in the training of new workers -- which addresses a major issue for foodservice operators faced with the turnover of personnel and high-training costs.

"Say you've got a new bartender who doesn't know how to make a Singapore Sling. Pow! It's right there in the computer, step by step," Grant explains.

Staff can employ the POS system to remind them of methods and policies, identify which tables need to be covered, track the progress of kitchen orders and show which members of the staff are checked in or out.

Limited employee resources and growing competition from Internet gourmet shops means there is more pressure on dine-in operations to offer delivery service, and implementing a POS system that can help track delivery orders soon may become more critical.

"Delivery will move away from traditional concepts, and I think the big surge will come from table-service restaurants -- quality restaurants offering full-service delivery," Branson says. "What makes it cost-effective today is building the whole thing out of POS entry that connects kitchen, delivery, the works."

"I think it's likely that for the table-service segment, delivery is going to be a big thing," Grant says. "You also have to look at the whole dot.com thing as it works its way into the restaurant business. Sooner or later you have to believe the opportunities to connect this way with customers are going to make business sense, if you can sort through some of the ridiculous costs and concepts you come across."

"All that futurism is fine, but it can distract us, Branson says. "The simple reality is that Joe Blow restaurant, and not just the biggest companies, has readily available today a tremendous number of advantages (if the operator can just visualize) POS beyond basic functionality."

micros

The point-of-sale is increasingly becoming a bin for data collection at all levels. And recently, Portland, Ore.-based Shari's Restaurant rolled out a data mining software application that connects directly to their POS.

The software is produced and supported by Columbia, Md.-based Micros, which also supports Shari's POS system. Micros is spreading its wings into data warehousing through the Internet. The company

recently has entered into a three-year agreement with USInternetworking, where USi will be hosting the POS company's Internet applications. Its first application is Insight, a restaurant-data warehousing product, which is now available as a web-enabled application. A complete suite of hotel and restaurant products will be introduced throughout the year, according to company officials.

Here's how it works. USi connects its Insight program to the POS system in the restaurant through a modem hookup. Information is then sent through the Internet to Usi's AppHost Server located in Annapolis, Md., where the information is processed.

Micros has been testing its data-warehousing project -- called Usi AppHost -- at one of its Shari's Restaurants since February. Shari's is currently rolling out the Insight program to all of its 100 locations in the northwest region.

"Purchasing the product allowed us to leap past a lot of the painful, slow data-warehouse development that would normally go into a data warehouse," says Ron McCauley, CIO at Shari's. "I've released several reports from Insight to management here. Management has been very pleased with the reports."

By using the new software, the restaurant operators can more easily view data pertaining to their business, including the amount spent per customer at a certain time of day, table management and the speed of dining.

Micros expects the software to become an additional service to its traditional POS applications. Beefeater, a chain of more than 250 family-oriented full-service restaurants in the United Kingdom, also is looking into rolling out the systems later this year.

"As a participant in the USi AppHost Program, we will be able to offer a suite of new Internet-based products for the hotel and restaurant industries through the application service provider model," says Micros's executive vice president, strategic initiatives and general counsel, Thomas Patz. "These products include the Opera suite for the hotel industry and a suite of restaurant products developed by the Micros Hospitality Internet Technology Development Group."

As the technology becomes increasingly integrated at the point-of-sale and as restaurants begin to spend more, restaurants increasingly will reap the benefits of data warehousing and mining.

Restaurateurs waiting for new ways to market their customers will soon be able to print customized coupons, promotions and other messages on their customer's receipts with TransAct's new POS color printer.

The Wallingford, Conn.-based transact developed the printer -- called the Ithaca POSjet 1000 -- in alliance with Hewlett-Packard Company. The POSjet 1000 incorporates design and functionality features that reduce printer downtime and prevent mechanical damage, critical in the hospitality environment.

"The POSjet 1000 transforms receipts into an all new, brand-building marketing medium," says Bart C. Shuldman, president and chief executive officer of TransAct. "This new technology allows customers to print customized two-color receipts, personalized logos and other images on inexpensive and readily available media, catapulting receipt printers from a utilitarian role to that of business-builder. Just as printing has evolved from monochrome to full color in other markets, we fully expect the same to happen at point-of-sale, adding a whole new dimension to the purchasing experience."

TransAct's incorporation of HP's thermal-inkjet technology in its transaction-based printers dramatically

increases the functionality and benefits of point-of-sale printing. The POSjet 1000 prints color, customized receipts with graphics, logos, promotion coupons or any selling message. "Receipts will now get noticed, saved and used to generate repeat business and build customer retention," says Shuldman. "Your receipt printer becomes a value-added business solution. It becomes an economical, flexible medium that facilitates innovative cross promotions and real time promotions."

The automatic paper-loading system reduces the downtime involved with changing paper rolls. To address a primary concern in the hospitality industry, the POSjet 1000 was designed with a unique, vertically-mounted controller board to prevent damage to the circuit board caused by spillage.

In addition, each cartridge prints an average six million characters, meeting the high volume-low cartridge replacement printing needs of the transaction environment. And the specially formulated-for-POS ink dries in less than a second.

TransAct Technologies designs, manufactures and markets transaction-based printers and related products under the Ithaca, Magnete and Transact.com brand names.

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